TEACHING COMMUNITY PROJECTS

Benjamin Shepard, Ph.D.
New York College of Technology/City University of New York

The goal for community projects, a course which forms the foundation of the author's teaching, is to establish the grounding for the budding practitioner's subsequent social justice work. The following offers a narrative of his journey to community projects. In it, he reflects on his teaching, as well as his experiences as a student and community practitioner, and the ways these experiences informed his approaches toward teaching others about the subject.

For years now, I have taught community organizing and community projects. A common theme of teaching these classes is that no class is the same. No community project or even understanding of the concept of justice is the same. Everyone comes to these classes in their own ways, from their own perspectives. Yet, in each class, I hope for students to connect their lives with some notion of community and civic engagement. In doing so, students are invited to view their experience and story in relation to larger injustices, as well as solutions and possibilities. Sometimes awareness begins with something as small as a gripe about tuition increases at the school or a car accident. In other cases, it follows a friend or family member getting sick with HIV/AIDS or cancer, and finding a callous medical system; racial profiling; or an immigration policy gone wrong, etc. Along the way, many students come to see and value something larger than their own individual self-interest. Some find themselves in the middle of a struggle to create change on an individual or even community level, at a school, a clinic, or agency. Social work and human services—from Jane Addams to Harold McPheeters, from the Settlements to Welfare Rights and AIDS activism—has a long tradition taking on such macro level challenges. Most begin as individuals who trace a micro level challenge to its logical conclusion, from case to cause within larger social and economic system.

I was first assigned to teach Community Projects when I was on the faculty at the CSULB Department of Social Work, and later taught community organization and development at CUNY. In teaching these courses, I have always asked students to consider the links and divides between the history, theory and current practice of community projects and organizing, as well as agency based practice. Before teaching these classes, I spent over a decade consumed within the practice, in settings such as AIDS housing, harm reduction, syringe exchange, welfare rights, grass roots organizing, community gardening, and the like. Along the way, I also tried to keep up with the literature in social work. In doing so, I was constantly reminded that what was written about practice rarely matched my experiences in the field. For example, in 2001, Michael Reisch and Janice Andrew published the work *The Road Less Traveled: A History of Radical Social Work*. In it the authors ended the story in the 1970's, as if radical community practice ended with Nixon administration. As far as I was concerned, nothing could be further from the truth. So much had happened since the 1960's, as radical social work and community practice continued to shift and evolve with a range of issues: including immigration, labor abuses, deinstitutionalization, homelessness, environmental disaster, HIV/AIDS, anti-war activism, the advent of neoliberalism, and the movements to reflect these struggles. So I attempted to address this shift in my writing as well as activism (see Shepard 1997; Shepard and Hayduk, 2002). Over these years, I ran into many social workers involved in social justice struggles, yet I was also aware

that many were not. And those who were not didn't seem to identify as social workers, but rather as organizers. Theory seemed to be divided from practice; professional identity separated from political conviction and aspiration. My goal has always been to bring a rich range of practice experiences into the classroom, as well as student projects.

Throughout the classes, students are charged to take on the complicated circumstances of urban poverty, organizing, and community development as well as service provision. To develop as reflective practitioners (see Schon, 1987), students are given the opportunity to compare their hopes and desires with the realities on the mean streets. In order for social workers to deserve Schon's (1987) designation as a reflective practitioner, they will have to contemplate and study the basic tools of a field to the point where "knowing and action" become one gesture, a process in which knowing is in the action (p.25). To get there, students are asked to connect the pulsing work taking place in neighborhoods and communities with their budding development as practitioners. This interplay between community practice and organizing only infuses vitality and innovation into social services, especially when students strive to appreciate the complicated lives, circumstances, and struggles of individuals, families, and groups in their communities.

In each class, I ask the students to consider a few approaches to community engagement. Here students are asked to: let stories move them, build community and democracy in the streets and in the classroom, organize around strengths, go out and get the seat of their pants dirty with research, connect with a model, and "connect the dots" of a struggle within their own stories. These themes bear exploration.

Let Stories Move You

For community practice and organizing to be useful, many students develop a meaningful connection within their own communities. My first social work internship at the Chicago Area Project in 1995-6 had helped galvanize the point. As part of my orientation, I learned about organizers associated with the project dating back to the 1930's. The organization's founder—University of Chicago sociologist Clifford Shaw—collected oral histories of delinquent youth, documenting their stories to highlight the multiple dimensions of their worlds and the various impacts on their lives. The lesson from Shaw's work was that there is no need to remain detached when one listens to these stories, especially if one listens carefully with an eye toward changing social conditions (Shaw, 1930). Reading the stories of Clifford Shaw and his work with delinquent youth, I was lulled into participation.

By my second year in Chicago, I followed Shaw's calling, interviewing many of the organizers who had worked with him, starting in the 1930's. One of the first interviews for my oral history was with Billy Brown, a then 86-year-old African-American woman with short, curly brown hair and animated eyes. She explained what she had learned about neighborhood life from Clifford Shaw:

I think Dr. Shaw felt that this was yours. This was my plot where I belong so I want to make it the nicest part of my life and the nicest part of my entity to live here. It was just like a castle, like a castle that belonged to you. And he felt that for each person. Just wherever you went that was your home. If you were a part of it, you lived there. Its small neighborhoods, that's what it was, small neighborhoods. And he felt that you could organize wherever you went, you could organize. And this organization could be your castle (quoted in Shepard, 1997A).

Brown was not the only member of CAP to reflect on the group's neighborhood emphasis. A love for community was intricately connected with this story.

Another organizer with the group, Tony Sorrentino, recalled Clifford Shaw's understanding of community:

Shaw's approach was, sure he wanted to bring about change in the community, but he believed very strongly in the notion that the way you do that is by neighbor helping neighbor. And so that was his experience of growing up in a very small town in Indiana in the early days of industrialization. He would give us examples such as, if somebody's farm or home burned down, the neighbors all automatically came together; they didn't apply for a grant or call in the government. They just did it themselves. Likewise, with the delinquent, he'd get out of line, they didn't call in juvenile court. They just handled it informally. So he hoped that some of these forces of the primary community of the rural small town could be utilized in efforts to deal with the problems of an urban community (quoted in Shepard, 1997A).

Sorrentino's story places the conception of community as primary interaction at the center of the CAP organizing strategy. Here, community is understood in terms of people's interpersonal interactions and neighborhood members' personal relationships with each other (Effrat, 1974). Community conceived of as primary interaction includes aspects of Toennies's explanation of Gemeinschaft which, "included the local community, [it] also went beyond it...it referred to social bonds...characterized by emotional cohesion, depth, continuity, and fullness," (Effrat, 1974, p.3).

Shaw (1939, p. 4) outlined his community organizing philosophy in a 1939 report to the board of trustees. "[CAP's] activities are regarded primarily as devices for enlisting the active participation of local residents in a constructive community enterprise, for creating and crystallizing neighborhood sentiment on behalf of the welfare of the children and the social and physical improvement of the community as a whole." As for teaching community projects, the core lesson of this approach was that student organizers must respectfully engage those involved within the life of the community. In doing so, they would be well advised to cultivate the "active participation" of those in the community, just as Shaw had once done.

Yet to do so, one has to have an honest and comprehensive understanding of the conditions in the community. Community practitioners must assess the conditions of the social environment, using as many tools and methods as possible, then act on the results. For example, when Shaw first heard delinquents tell him they wanted to start a camp, he was distraught, but this is what they wanted so he followed their lead. The point of a comprehensive needs assessment is to act on the results of data one collects, not on one's preconceived notions (Bennett, 1981). Without this needs assessment, community practice is flawed from the start. Students are required to complete a community needs assessment in most community practice and organizing classes, including strengths with the needs.

Build Community and Democracy in the Classroom and the Streets.

Over the years of teaching community practice, my goal for each class has come to be threefold: 1) to build a community among students, 2) to connect the campus with the community outside it, and 3) to help students develop their own sense of social justice and democratic political engagement. When I first sat in Irving Spergel's community organization and development class at the University of Chicago, I was struck by his sense of connection with the community, its pulse, problems, strengths, and people. A scholar of gang life, he talked about the lives of the gang members he worked with and hired them to do research with him. He wrote stories about

them. He brought organizers into the classroom, and helped us feel like a community as we conducted our research studies. He also helped us to see where organizing fit into the larger picture of social work. Early in the class, he invited Saul Alinksy's protégé Ed Chambers to talk about ACORN's approach to organizing. Harkening back to Alexis De Toqueville, Chambers described an idea of democracy in the United States. Drawing on the board, Chambers suggested that our democracy was dependent on three elements: the market economy, government, and civil society. In between the market and government, there had to be space for civil society. Without it, democracy would be in peril. Over the next two decades, this idea would become more and more influential to my writing, thinking, teaching, and activism (Shepard, 2002). Civil society could be a word for public space and community. Without it democracy as we know it, would be doomed. In this way, questions about community organizing and practice would have to be fundamentally linked with questions about democracy, citizen participation, and public space. Movements from the Settlement Houses to Global Justice would build on a similar sentiment.

Organize Around Strengths

In Chicago, I ran across the writings of John McNight (McNight,1995; Kretzmann & McNight, 1997). Find a community strength, McNight implored community practitioners. Each community has one. Don't just look for what is wrong; that is too easy. It is the job of organizers to find community assets from day one. In communities, people know by stories, he advised (McNight, 1995). Solutions to challenges faced in community will be found within these stories, assets, forms of leadership, cultural capital, social networks and the like.

Research

"Go out and get the seat of your pants dirty in research," preached Robert E. Park, a luminary of the Chicago School. His point, of course, was to get out and there and get into the middle of your research; get into the action. If you were studying dancers at a club,

go and dance with one of them; don't stand on the sidelines with a clip board. This tradition permeated the Chicago research tradition (Bulmer, 1986). If you are interested in learning about those looking for work, don't just study the census or unemployment rolls; go talk with the unemployed as well as those looking to hire them, as W.J. Wilson (1997) did. Talk to all the stakeholders and find out what they think is going on. Get out into the mix and try to learn from these experiences. Here students come to see that there is something to learn from almost everyone they meet, as Ray Raymond, one of the CAP organizers from my oral history implored. Yet the impediments to the recognition of local expertise over professional training are deeply ingrained within the history of social work practice. This point came through early in my oral history interviews of the Chicago Area Project. At first, the area project was not well received, especially among the social work establishment. As then 85-year-old Ray Raymond, a CAP organizer, explained:

The critics, you see, were the "experts." The University of Chicago Department of Social Service and the Abbott sisters, they frowned on this. And Shaw had practically no one to give him the respect except Earnest Burges. Ernie Burges was already ruminating over this whole question of community organization.

The social work establishment worried about those without training counseling delinquents. However, Raymond believed "the experts," social workers and policy analysts, had no special insight into or solutions to neighborhood problems. The point of such an approach is to appreciate the assets which every community possesses, not just the letters behind their name.

Yet the question for students of community projects would remain: how do social workers collaborate with community efforts, instead of talking down to them or co-opting them? At the Chicago Area Project, Clifford Shaw had local leaders who would work with kids who

had gotten into trouble. The point was to prevent delinquency. So the group negotiated with the courts to have neighborhood youth spend time with mentors they trusted and stay in the neighborhoods under supervision. Social workers came in and said, "Now you have to have a social work license to do this." And community ties to the people doing the work were lost. The youth did not trust the social workers, they trusted the neighborhood mentors. They were no longer working with the people preventing delinquency that they trusted. Through community projects, I ask social workers to change the hat that they wear so they can actually collaborate and respect community practices. "And get respect in the community by doing things the community wants, by joining with them and enduring, for a time at least, the mistrust," elaborated Frances Fox-Piven in an interview with the author on the subject. "You have to expect mistrust because it is well founded. But I think only in practice can social workers become credible partners with low income people. It's a long term process," (quoted in Shepard, 2008, p. 11). Over the years, much of community practice would come to incorporate such a perspective (McNight, 1995).

Building on Shaw, Fox-Piven, and McNight's lessons, I stumbled upon the participatory action research tradition. Here, those studying an issue connect their research with those impacted by the problem or need. And research becomes part of a community based approach to addressing a given issue. Instead of looking at research in terms of natural science with a beginning, middle, and end, from a hypothesis, through the collection of data, interpretation, and publication of findings, action research views the process of inquiry as far from linear. It lasts as long as the issue continues, in an ongoing interplay with the challenges the community faces. Action researchers ask community stakeholders what questions they think should be answered. From here, they get out into the community to find answers, collect materials, experiment with ideas, and generate new questions, to be considered anew (Reason & Bradbury, 2001; Stoecker, 2005; Stringer, 1999). The process
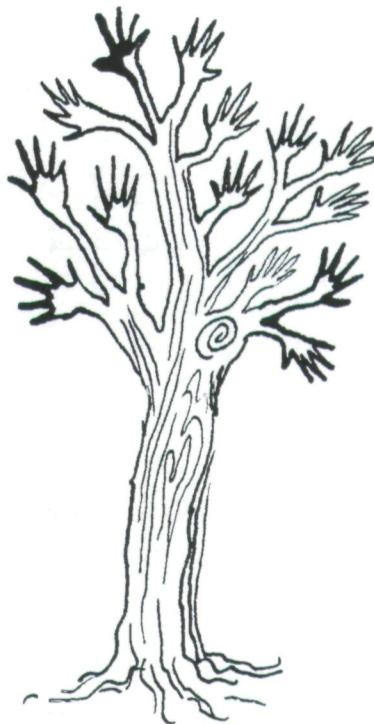
goes on and on, mirroring the pulse of neighborhoods in constant flux.

Connect with a Model

As I was finishing my masters at Chicago, Irving Spergel convinced me that Shaw and the history of Chicago delinquency advocacy was a topic which had already been well mined, so I decided to look to alternate subjects and movements. This challenge became all that much more feasible when I moved to New York after graduate school. It was a matter of days before I had plugged into the local activist scene and became involved with organizing around public space. After a few years of activism and research, I entered the Ph.D. program at Hunter College School of Social Work, where I hoped to reflect on what has happened out in the field. For my Ph.D. research, I collected the stories of organizers, who I asked to reflect on their own practice. One of the most pleasurable parts of the process was listening to their many stories. One garden activist counseled that activists involved in the movement recognized the utility of connecting multiple methods: from direct action to legal strategies, mobilization with street theatrics and art, as part of their city wide organizing campaign to save the gardens. Another cautioned that you may not win if you

only have a rally, but he explained that if you connect it with lobbying, direct action, research, mobilization, and media work, the perfect storm of actions may create power and change. As I listened, I realized that many organizers see their work as part of a coherent organizational model. Yet another organizer stated that, although we can't be guaranteed success in every campaign, we certainly court failure if we do nothing. So it is useful to fight back, with a coherent organizing strategy which includes a clear position statement about what one wants to see happen with a given issue, research around this issue, mobilization of allies, coherent direct action, media and legal strategies as well as a jigger of fun to sustain the campaign (see Shepard, 2011).

"Connect the Dots" of a Struggle Within Your Own Story.

I was drawn to my first demonstration with the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power (ACT UP) after a close family friend suffered a long, painful period of mental and physical deterioration before succumbing to HIV/AIDS. On the ride to the action, I spoke with other AIDS activists about the experience. Many shared similar stories. After the action, I reflected on the ways our different stories interconnected. The experience of sharing stories inspired me (see Shepard, 1997B) to join the struggle (Shepard and Hayduk, 2002). This is part of the beauty of community projects; it allows us to be moved to take action as we revel in an interconnection between people and communities. Dr. Martin Luther King (1963) long ago suggested that our destinies are woven into a single garment of history. From this point of view, all of our lives are interconnected within a matrix of stories and gestures. The point of community projects is to explore connections between communities and stories. In teaching community projects, students consistently report that their favorite part of the class is the class presentations, in which they share their findings and reflections on their projects. I have had students stand up and narrative their family histories as immigrants, connecting their stories with intricate gaps in immigration policy. Other students have stood up to talk about their experiences with losses to HIV/AIDS. Others have talked about their experiences with shifting conditions in neighborhoods. One group of students created a documentary film project, with interviews with activists at an anti-war march. Others saw a lack of green space in a neighborhood and created a community garden.

The core point of community projects is to help students to connect their own lives and practice with stories of social or economic justice. Here, just as students created a community garden, they create an experience in democratic living. Such social experimentation, innovation, and possibility goes a long way. Mixing them together, organizers and practitioners draft their own chapter in a colorful history of practice. In doing so, they take their rightful place in the rich tradition of community practice I am fortunate enough to teach.

References

• Bennett, J. (1981). *Oral History and Delinquency.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

• Bulmer, M. (1986) *The Chicago School of Sociology.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

• Effrat, M.P. (1974). *The Community Approaches and Applications.* New York: The Free Press.

• King, M.L. (1963). *Why We Can't Wait.* New York: Mentor

• McNight, J. (1995). *The Careless Community: Community and Its Counterfeits.* New York: Basic Books.

• Kretzmann, J.P., & McNight, J. (1997). *Building Communities from the Inside Out: A Path Toward Finding and Mobilizing a Community's Assets.* Chicago: ACTA Publications.

• Reason, P., & Bradbury, H. (editors) (2001). *Handbook of Action Research.* Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

• Reisch, M., & Andrews, J. (2001). The Road Less Traveled: A History of Radical Social Work. East Suxxex, UK: Brunner Routledge.

• Schon, D. (1987). *Educating the Reflective Practitioner.* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

• Shaw, C. (1930). *The Jack Stroller: A Delinquent's Own Story.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

• Shaw, C. (1939). Chicago Area Project: An Experimental Neighborhood Program for the Prevention and Treatment of Juvenile Delinquency and Crime.

• Shepard, B. (1997A). *In Search of the Community in Community Organizing: An Oral History of the Chicago Area Project.* Unpublished paper. Completed as part of the Masters Program at the University of Chicago School of Social Services Administration

• Shepard, B. (1997B). *White Nights and Ascending Shadows: An Oral History of the San Francisco AIDS Epidemic.* London: Cassell Press.

• Shepard, B. & Hayduck, R. 2002. *From ACT UP to the WTO: Urban Protest and Community Building in the Era of Globalization.* New York: Verso.

• Shepard, B. (2008, Spring). On Challenging Authority: An Oral History Interview with Frances Fox Piven. *Reflections: Narratives of Professional Helping. 14*(2):3-15

• Shepard, B. (2011). *Play, Creativity and Social Movements: If I Can't Dance, Its Not My Revolution.* New York: Routledge.

• Stringer, E.T. (1999). *Action Research* (Second Edition). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

• Stoecker, R. (2005). *Research Methods for Community Change.* Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

• Wilson, W.J. (1997). *When Work Disappears: The World of the New Urban Poor.* New York: Viking.

Benjamin Shepard, Ph.D., is an Assistant Professor of Human Service at New York College of Technology/City University of New York. Comments regarding this article can be sent to: bshepard@citytech.cuny.edu.